

New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1956

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Rachel W. Coffin, Editor

Week of January 30, 1956

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1956 PRODUCTIONS

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NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES

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"The Hot Corner"



New York World-Telegram
and
The Sun

January 26, 1956

'The Hot Corner' Opens at the Golden

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

The new entry at the Golden, called "The Hot Corner," is a comedy about baseball. It is like watching your favorite team fall chance after chance, and end up with a very minor score.

The show has the manner and material of a crisp, speedy comedy. But the laughs pop up too far apart.

Sam Levene is pretty much the whole show, as a bush league manager, suddenly given the chance to go back to running his old Detroit team.

'Lefty's' Trouble.

The deal depends on his winning a pennant, and that depends on his young pitcher, "Lefty."

The trouble with "Lefty" is that he once promised his

father never to cross a picket line. And now the peanut vendors have been thrown out of the local park, and are busily picketing it.

The comedy tells how Levene, as a quick-tempered, over-anxious, and somehow endearing character, pulls strings to get his boy to the pitcher's mound for the vital game.

Some Sound Laughs.

In the third and best act, the play gets some sound laughs when it quits trying to be smart aleck, and turns into a very personable and touching domestic comedy.

All along it has verbal and visual situations which should be mighty funny, but seldom are. Levene once gets himself into a rhetorical de-

bate with his wife, in which he insists that he wants to be Ginger Rogers. The young pitcher gets into a tangled, long-distance conversation with his huge family of miners.

There is ample byplay about efforts to stall the game by predicting rain. And there are gimmicks, like Levene's trick of cracking walnuts in his pocket when his temper threatens to explode.

The elaborate first-act situation, when Levene and the kids watch a game on TV, while four women play scrabble in the same room, is more than amusing. Much riper is the moment when the four mature girls come home from a ginny lunch, each with a new hat.

Levene's Direction?

It is a fair guess that, good as Mr. Levene is on the stage, he should never have tried to direct the play. The script needs ingenious invention and exact timing, if it is to amount to anything. No one involved in every incident in it, could possibly appreciate how often it seems starchy.

Vicki Cummings plays the overwhelmed but loving wife. It is a one-tone role, but

"THE HOT CORNER"

Comedy by Allen Boretz and Ruby Sully; staged by Sam Levene; scenery and lighting by Ralph Alswang; costumes by Virginia Voland; presented by Eleanor Saldenberg at the John Golden Theatre January 25, 1956. The cast: Bobbie Stanley....Daryl Grimes George "Muldoon" Wilson....

Cliff Tatum
Mae Stanley....Vicki Cummings
Fred Stanley....Sam Levene
J. Rupert Wilson.....
Eric Brotherson

Charley O'Connor.....
Harry Holcombe
Clarence "Lefty" McShane....

Don Murray
Jane Kaiser.... Camilla Ashland
Maude Wilson...Dorothy Duckworth
Frances Halliday..Nan McFarland
August Hegel.....Horace Cooper
Gus Markheim.....Dave Starr
Eddie Genaro.....Bern Hoffman
Felix Cassidy.....Ned Glass

Miss Cummings abandons her familiar broad mannerisms and makes the old girl very human.

There is not another performance in the show which could not have benefitted from some loving constructive criticism in rehearsal.

DAILY NEWS

January 26, 1956

'The Hot Corner,' Baseball Farce, Takes a Hefty Swing and Pops Up

By JOHN CHAPMAN

There are some fine, crazy ideas in "The Hot Corner" and some delightfully lunatic characters in it. There also are two good scenes of door-slammings, window-popping, helter-skelter farce. Moreover, there are winning performances by Sam Levene, Vicki Cummings and Don Murray. Somehow, though, these admirable elements don't quite meld into a compact and attention-holding comedy, and the legendary whammy on plays about baseball is still working.

"The Hot Corner" was presented at the John Golden Theatre last evening. Its elements are about as follows: Levene, mournful and harried and funny as always, is a minor-league ball-club manager who has been

busted out of the big leagues because of his hot temper. Miss Cummings is the lady who quit the theatre 20 years ago to marry him. Murray, a sensational young pitcher, is a hill-billy and a southpaw, too, which is about as dumb as you can get in baseball. (It might be as dumb as you can get anywhere, as a matter of fact.)

Desperate Plot

The elements of the play are excellent, but the plot which has

been concocted by Allen Boretz and Ruby Sully is little better than three acts of desperation, and it just doesn't manage to hold the comedy together. It depends, unfortunately, on the whimsical but unconvincing premise that a left-handed pitcher won't pitch because the peanut vendors have been thrown out of the ball park and have established a picket line. As humor this idea is okay, but as basic plot it is as shaky as a dust mop in a tenement.

Give authors Boretz and Sully credit, though, for many nice, off-beat inventions like a U.S. weather forecaster (Horace Cooper) who always carries an umbrella in case he's wrong again.

Give them credit also for their lampoons of baseball players. It is very difficult to caricature the average ballplayer because he is a caricature to begin with and where does one go from there?

Some Pleasant Actors

Miss Cummings and Levene are experienced and expert hands at any type of comedy, and they are working every minute in "The Hot Corner." Don Murray is exceptionally pleasant as the young hillbilly, who doesn't know quite how he feels one morning because he has had only one breakfast and only eight hours' sleep. There is a funny character bit by Dave Starr in the role of a peanut seller with an umpire's voice, and Daryl Grimes, a newcomer to Broadway, is a highly attractive ingenue.

Levene has directed "The Hot Corner," and he is at his best when the action is fastest—as any graduate of the George Abbott Academy should be. There is a pleasant and very brightly lighted small-house setting by Ralph Alswang.

Daily Mirror

January 26, 1956

Robert Coleman's **THEATRE:**

'The Hot Corner' A Strike Out at Golden

• Farce on baseball is a minor league entry in a big league town.

The trouble with "The Hot Corner" is that it's a minor league entry in a big league town. The new tenant of the John Golden Theatre boasts an interesting idea, and packs a fair quota of sock laughs, but it lacks the class demanded for a contender on the Main Stem.

Allen Boretz and Ruby Sully are concerned with a former big-time baseball manager, fighting his way back to the top via the bushes. He now cracks walnuts instead of general managers'

jaws in tight spots, and hopes that the transgression that brought about his banishment 10 years before will be forgiven.

DETROIT HIS OLD TEAM, wants him back, provided he can cop a pennant. But that depends

on a rookie pitcher. So what happens? The boss of the park tosses out the peanut vendors because it costs too much to clean up the shells, and "Lefty" McShane refuses to cross their picket line.

Fred Stanley blows his top again, and seemingly his big chance. But you know as well as we do that such a nice guy fares all right in the end. And he is a nice guy, despite his momentary flare-ups under stress, as played by the amiable and resourceful Sam Levene.

Vicki Cummings, a whiz with a wisecrack, is a standout as Fred's loyal spouse. Don Murray does well by the taxing role of the not-overly-bright but well-meaning "Lefty" McShane. And there are helpful contributions by Daryl Grimes, Cliff Tatum, Eric Brotherson, Harry Holcombe, Camila Ashland, Dortha Duckworth, Nan McFarland, Horace Cooper, Dave Starr, Bern Hoffman and Ned Glass.

Levene, doubling in brass as

director, has staged the farce with skill. He does everything possible to turn caricatures into people. But that old jinx that besets plays dealing with the diamond game is having its innings. True, "Damm Yankee" beat it with sex, music and imagination.

IT TAKES A LOT of doing to best the hex on scripts about the great American pastime.

Now, "The Hot Corner" is based on baseball, but it also dips into the decencies by which men live. For all his hot temper and finagling, Fred Stanley comes clean with Detroit in the pinch and is justly rewarded. And there are vignettes of small-town life, aided by Ralph Alswang's accurate setting, that ring true.

Producer Eleanor Saitenberg has made a good try with "The Hot Corner," but it tosses knuckle balls over the plate and they are hard to catch. As Cardinal scout Mike Gonzalez—no master of Oxford English—once reported on a prospect: "Good field, no hit."

Herald Tribune

January 26, 1956

THEATER

'The Hot Corner'

By WALTER F. KERR

IN THE new comic enterprise at the Golden, four giddy matrons engage in heated debate over a game of Scrabble and at last come to the conclusion that there is no such word as "phooph" (pronounced "foof"). There is such a word as "phooph." It's what plays like "The Hot Corner" are made of.

"Phooph," in this instance, stands for folksy, frenzied farce, soft as cotton in all the sentimental family didoes and breathless with empty fury when the doors start flying open. It's not a good combination.

If the play could be sold, Sam Levene and Vicki Cummings could sell it—and on the homey, happy-anniversary level. Mr. Levene is a very endearing fellow whenever he ambles slowly into his upstate New York livingroom, takes off his shoes,

drops his balding head against the back of the sofa and lets those deep, sad circles under his eyes relax.

He's funny, too, when he's sound asleep—and showing only the faintest signs of rejoining the universe as a cup of hot coffee is waited gently under his nose. Mr. Levene has a restful, peaceable air about him, and it's no stretch at all to watch him get down on his knees in quiet, confiding, very reasonable prayer.

Miss Cummings is a pleasant companion for such a man. Her naturally sardonic vocal snarl and her faintly disapproving nose provide a nice obligato to the sentiment; and this wry exterior conceals such an obviously warm heart that you know she doesn't mean it, any way.

The trouble is, I guess, that authors Allen Boretz and Ruby

Sully won't leave this comfortable couple alone. Mr. Levene is playing a baseball manager who has slipped down to the minor leagues and who doesn't really hope for another shot at the big time. Hope comes, in the person of a gawky, drawling whiz of a small-town pitcher—and an invitation to take this left-handed genius to Detroit.

With it comes all the mechanical gadgetry of revolving-door comedy. A local big shot decides that peanuts can no longer be sold in Mr. Levene's stadium; it costs \$20,000 a year to cart away the shells. The dispossessed peanut vendors picket the place. Mr. Levene's young hero refuses to cross the picket line. Mr. Levene is in trouble—and so are we all.

Before you can say "Blood is thicker than baseball"—which some one does say—there are rooting sections in the living room, watching a night game on television and roaring directions to the players by telephone. There are married ladies getting plastered on afternoon martinis, peanut salesmen slinking out of the room under aliases, outraged club owners darting around pillars and sliding over breakfast counters, extra-curricular neighbors hiding in trees and leaping over coffee tables.

There is, in short, a very hollow hurricane whistling through the premises, whisking away all the easy domestic humor at which our principals are so adept and thereby sweeping simple belief right out the back door. Mr. Levene needs an answer to his prayer; and it ain't peanuts.

Considering that the jokes sometimes get right down to "I'm a general manager," "Well, go manage some generals," the supporting company does nicely enough. Don Murray's ambling, gaping, aw-shucks pitcher is a refreshing variation on the standard backwoods breed, surprisingly funny in an extended telephone conversation with the folks back home. (Long distance, he can't tell his ma from his pa.)

Daryl Grimes is a pretty addition to the general decor in the role of a romantic daughter. Eric Brotherson nurses a black eye with some broad farce expertness. Horace Cooper is a welcome sight as a weatherman with a protectively rolled umbrella, and Dave Starr gets a bit of sideline fun out of an impressively fogbound voice.

As a character, Sam Levene does get out of the minor leagues. But "The Hot Corner" is there to stay.

New York Post

January 26, 1956

By Richard Watts Jr.

Baseball Isn't Necessarily Comic

If it weren't for the success of "Damn Yankees," people might be saying today that "The Hot Corner" was merely additional proof of the melancholy doom once fatalistically believed to hang balefully over all theatrical works dealing with baseball. We all know better now. The only

hoodoo that tripped up the baseball comedy by Allen Boretz and Ruby Sully, which opened last night at the John Golden Theatre, is that it is an almost fantastically laborious and unamusing play.

This seems all the more disappointing because it provides the first local role for the dynamic Sam Levene since he scored his memorable personal triumph in the classic "Guys and Dolls." It clearly isn't Mr. Levene's fault that he is unable to

save "The Hot Corner" as either its leading actor or its director, despite his characteristic skill and diligence. The new comedy is beyond saving. Getting back to the comparison with "Damn Yankees," I doubt if even Gwen Verdon could rescue it.

The Dialogue

It is usually unfair to attempt to characterize a comedy by quoting one line from its dialogue, but I'm inclined to believe that

there is a brief remark in "The Hot Corner" which captures its richly unhumorous quality in a nutshell. One of the play's characters is the general manager of the Detroit baseball team, who is an old-time enemy of the play's central figure, and, in a moment of exasperation, another character says to him with biting wit, "Go manage some generals!"

Another unexpected quality of "The Hot Corner" is that it emerges, no doubt unintentionally, as propaganda on behalf of profanity. The minor league manager played by Mr. Levene was expelled from the majors for his violent temper, and he tries to control his use of strong language. So everytime rage rises in him and he is tempted to swear at someone, he shouts out instead, "Cream cheese!" After a few dozen times of that, I, for one, began seeing the virtue of four-letter words.

The Plot

Anyway, there is a plot, which has something to do with the

troubles of the violent minor league manager, which are many. The chief one is that his star pitcher, who is in love with the manager's daughter, refuses to pass through a picket line and won't go into the ball park to pitch the big game because the peanut-sellers are picketing it. There is also the matter of Detroit's attempt to lure the manager back to the majors. Unfortunately, the situations aren't much funnier than the dialogue.

Mr. Levene labors heroically as the manager. So does Vicki Cummings as the manager's wife, loyal but sardonic. Don Murray, who was so good several years ago, in "The Rose Tattoo," is the young pitcher, a guileless boy from West Virginia—which, by the way, enables one of the wits in the comedy to say of him "He won't get as far as East Virginia." I thought Harry Holcombe was remarkably believable as the general manager from Detroit. "The Hot Corner" could set baseball back quite a way.

Journal American

January 26, 1956

Players Try In Strikeout

Baseball Comedy Never Gets The Bat Off Its Shoulder

By JOHN McCLAIN

THERE IS A POPULAR superstition that baseball, the great national pastime, is a poor subject for theatrical box office. This has been established by many failures in the past, but then along came "Damn Yankees" and the decision was reversed. There was rejoicing in the sand lots and the opinion seemed to be that there was nothing wrong with the game that a good script couldn't correct.

The unhappy point of all this is that "The Hot Corner," a new comedy which was played for openers at the John Golden Theatre last night has set baseball back a

good fifteen years. It has always been the conviction of partisan observers that there was drama and humor in the sport, enough to overcome the ennui of the distaff customers; the sport boasts its lingo, its intrinsic ideology is fierce, contentious, yet sound.

Lacks Impact

All this emerged at the Golden in a brazzled confusion of farce and fantasy. The play by Allen Boretz and Rudy Sully never carried the sense of authenticity without which it never should have been attempted, and there was not the hilarity or dramatic impact which might have risen above this deficiency. The central character goes around saying things like "Cream cheese it!", but one is left with the feeling that this is neither inside baseball nor very good inside theatre.

The two central characters are old favorites, Sam Levene and Vickie Cummings—and Mr. Levene directed the proceedings—but it is singularly strange that these sensitive

troupers would not have been able to read the scoreboard before the team reached New York.

Humor Missing

It didn't seem to me that the clients were given the slightest urge to care about what happened to most of the people involved, and in the meantime the lines weren't funny enough. If Mr. Levene and Miss Cummings can't get fun out of a line—the line ain't funny.

Of course there were meritorious performances by people like Cliff Tatum, a kid who enacted a wonderful bunt play which back-fired; Harry Holcombe, who looked strangely like Dizzy Dean; Eric Brotherson, in a woefully rubber-stamped part; Don Murray, Horace Cooper, Dave Starr and others.

But it's bad news all around for "The Hot Corner." They didn't get a hit; they didn't even take the bat off the shoulders.

"The Hot Corner"—continued

The New York Times

January 26, 1956

Theatre: 'Hot Corner'

Farce About Baseball Opens at the Golden

By BROOKS ATKINSON

SINCE Allen Boretz was one of the two authors of "Room Service," it would be logical to expect "The Hot Corner" to be at least half funny.

"The Hot Corner" is a farce about the baseball racket, written by Mr. Boretz and Ruby Sully, with Sam Levene in the most conspicuous part. It opened last evening at the John Golden Theatre, which has just been disemBorge-ed and is now open to casual business again.

All right, so Sam Levene is funny. After listening to his Jewish rhythms for a couple of hours, it is difficult not to start writing the way he talks. In "Guys and Dolls" he was Nathan Detroit, host to a movable crap game that wound up in a hospitable sewer. This time he is a baseball manager who is offered a contract to manage a big-league team—where? Detroit, of course. Give him time and Mr. Levene will get there yet.

On paper, the story of "The Hot Corner" sounds as risible as some that have turned out to be funny. Fred Stanley is a hot-tempered, big-mouthed baseball manager who drives

everybody crazy. He is his own worst enemy, except when anyone else is around. Just at the time when he is about to win a minor league pennant and the Detroit manager is offering him a contract, the peanut vendors throw a picket-line around the baseball park. And Stanley's star pitcher invokes his conscientious scruples against crossing a picket line.

The rest of "The Hot Corner" is composed of Fred Stanley's crises and his propensity for putting an uncivil foot in his mouth. Mr. Levene runs through his usual paces—shrugging his shoulders, looking to heaven for mercy and understanding, sawing the air with gestures indicating despair. He is all temperament, and the temperament is melancholy. Even in a farce that refuses to respond, Mr. Levene is a funny fellow.

There are some other disarming things in "The Hot

Corner." Vicki Cummings, always trapped in desperate situations, is the manager's persecuted wife. She is amusing, as usual, and looks particularly fine in Virginia Volland's attractive frocks. As a dim-witted but likable pitcher, Don Murray is excellent, and manages a humorous telephone conversation with skill. As a young lady who is very much in love, Daryl Grimes gives a performance that is winning professionally as well as personally.

There is also an actor who talks loud—Dave Starr, playing the part of an uninhibited peanut vendor. But that's about the whole story, except that Mr. Levene has staged the performance. Some day a law will be passed to forbid a man from staging a play in which he also plays the star part. But nothing could make a rollicking farce out of "The Hot Corner." Bring back Victor Borge!

"Time Limit!"

Daily Mirror

January 25, 1956

Robert Coleman's THEATRE:

'Time Limit!' Proves Absorbing Drama

• Gripping story of men under pressure
well-worth seeing at the Booth.

"Time Limit!" is a gripping drama about what makes men break under pressure. Henry Denker and Ralph Berkey haven't just written a well-made play. Rather have they penned a searching, questioning one. They want to know how much punishment the members of our armed forces must take at the hands of a ruthless enemy before cracking.

An Army major is accused of collaborating with the Communists in Korea, but the colonel assigned to weigh the testimony isn't satisfied that it contains all the answers. So he conscientiously sets out to find them, with amazing results. Since this is a play of suspense, we aren't going to tell you how it turns out.

ANYWAY, THIS CASE has implications far beyond itself. Denker and Berkey see the entire human race, as well as servicemen and the Army Code, involved. For communism, they warn, masks outrageous, ugly realities behind beautiful words. The Reds would prefer to win a victory via diabolically clever propaganda instead of resorting

to outright war. But win, they do intend.

If we are to beat them at their game, we must re-evaluate our own methods. We must learn how to stand up to pressure, for even granite melts under sufficient force. Denker and Berkey aren't certain as to the necessary procedure. They offer no easy solutions. All they do is urge us to think it over.

The Theatre Guild has given the thriller a most effective production. Windsor Lewis has staged the script in a manner to keep you on the edge of your seat. He has achieved the tension of a finely tempered steel spring,

without sacrificing honesty to the theatrical.

Arthur Kennedy is excellent as the colonel who wonders why a civilized, honorable man suddenly turns traitor, parroting a philosophy foreign to his very nature. Richard Kiley, as the officer charged with collaboration and unwilling to defend himself, is exactly right. He admirably resists the temptation to be showy.

THOMAS CARLIN, as a witness who finally throws light on what first appears to be an open-and-shut case, master's the emotional requirements of his role straightforwardly. Frank Aletter is good as a helpful and hep sergeant. Allyn McLerie, one of our better song-and-dance leading ladies, demonstrates that she is equally at home in a dramatic part.

Salutes are also due Patricia Benoit, Harvey Stephens and Arthur Storch for their contributions.

Ralph Alswang has designed a fascinating set, which in the blink of an eye can be transformed from a Judge Advocate's Office into a Korean prison camp. It obviates lulls that could be damaging to pace and timing.

"Time Limit!" is an absorbing and exciting experience in the theatre. It is an intelligent and thoughtful appraisal of some of the issues which our Army, and nation, must face. We think you will find an evening at the Booth rewarding.

"TIME LIMIT"

Play by Henry Denker and Ralph Berkey; staged by Windsor Lewis; settings and lighting by Ralph Alswang; costumes by Noel Taylor; presented by the Theatre Guild at the Booth Theatre, January 24, 1956. The cast:

T/Sgt. Charles Baker.....
Frank Aletter
Wac Cpl. Jean Evans.....
Allyn McLerie
2d Lt. George Miller.....
Thomas Carlin
Lt. Col. Wm. F. Edwards.....
Arthur Kennedy
Sentry..... Ch'ao-Li
1st Lt. Mike Livingston.....
Arthur Storch
Capt. Gus Jablonski.....
Alfred Sander
1st Lt. Steve Wardell.....
Lionel Ames
1st Lt. Peter "Zip" Walden.....
Mark Weston
2d Lt. "Boxer" Mueller.....
Robert Drew
2d Lt. Phil Garland.....
Jerry Morris
Col. Kim..... Kale Deel
Maj. Harry Cargill.....
Richard Kiley
Maj. Gen. Joseph Connors.....
Harvey Stephens
Mrs. Mary Cargill.....
Patricia Benoit
Capt. Joseph Connors Jr.....
John Connell

"Time Limit!"—continued

The New York Times

January 25, 1956

Theatre: "Time Limit!"

By BROOKS ATKINSON

OUT of a simple case of prison camp treason the authors of "Time Limit!" put on at the Booth last evening have written a stunning drama.

They are Henry Denker and Ralph Berkey. As playwrights they are only competent workmen. But they have taken a look at a horrifying wartime situation that cannot be resisted, and they have asked some searing questions about it that cannot be dismissed. Under the terse direction of Windsor Lewis, an excellent cast, led by Arthur Kennedy and Richard Kiley, gives a graphic performance. "Time Limit!" is an engrossing melodrama that moves into the realm of ideas.

After listening to Gen. William F. Dean's honest television interview about the pressures to which he was subjected in a North Korean prison camp, the authors began to question the comfortable judgments of

homeside codes of honor. "Time Limit!" is the story of an American major who is about to be officially charged with treason. It is a matter of record that he went over to the enemy, made propaganda broadcasts for them and complied with all their requirements. He admits that he is guilty and offers no defense.

But "Time Limit!" is also the story of a zealous judge advocate of a homeside Army post who is not satisfied with the plea or the evidence. He insists on finding the motive. Since "Time Limit!" is in many respects a mystery melodrama, it is not fair to report the story in detail. But before the final curtain comes down on a shattering scene, it is plain that the defendant's motive is creditable, if not magnanimous. He has been protecting the lives of eighteen comrades.

It is also plain that the truth of human beings is a very complex subject. Like all plays that have vitality in

them, "Time Limit!" revises a playgoer's mind. It makes a contribution to public thinking.

Into every melodrama, a little theatrical cant must fall. Here and there "Time Limit!" has its quota. The hero worship that the judge advocate inspires in his enlisted staff is mawkish. And the gestures toward humor in the army vernacular are automatic and routine. Amusement may yet turn out to be the curse of the entertainment business.

But once the authors really get rolling, once they take the audience into the neurotic squalor and misery of a prison camp, once they begin to get under the surface of their story and into the labyrinthine minds of the defendant and his accuser, their play is all alive—blunt, harrowing and provocative.

It could hardly be better acted. The performance is clean, swift and powerful. In his ingenious scene designing, Ralph Alswang has brilliantly solved the problem of getting from an Army office to a North Korean prison camp with no loss of time or illusion; and his lighting is superb.

As the inquiring judge advocate, Mr. Kennedy gives another one of those per-

formances that are simple in outline but that represent concentrated emotion. They are not only credible but also explosive. As the defendant, Mr. Kiley is the perfect counterpart—politely taciturn, courteously evasive, but full of passionate moral conviction when the time comes for plain speaking.

These are the strategic roles. But without exception, the minor parts are well played also. Allyn McLerie as a WAC whose sense of office decorum does not quite conceal the human being; Patricia Benoit as the anxious, instinctively well-mannered wife of the defendant; Thomas Carlin as the uneasy witness for the prosecution; Frank Aletter as the sergeant who is utilitarian for both the Army and the playwrights; Harvey Stephens as an alert commanding general; Arthur Storch as a tattered but high-spirited prisoner of war—give excellent performances.

Who is guilty? What is truth? In the course of a smashing, journalistic melodrama, Mr. Denker and Mr. Berkey ask those disturbing questions.

DAILY NEWS

January 25, 1956

"Time Limit!" an Exciting Drama With Kennedy and Kiley as Stars

By JOHN CHAPMAN

The Theatre Guild's new play, which opened last evening at the Booth Theatre, is called "Time Limit!" and the ! is tacked on, most likely, because the Guild had such

a success with "Oklahoma!" and doesn't want to fiddle around with fate. Since this melodrama is its own exclamation point I am going to drop the ! herewith to save wear and tear on my typewriter, my nerves and this newspaper's hard-working printers.

"Time Limit," by Henry Denker and Ralph Berkey, is a crisply, tightly fashioned, suspenseful thriller about a brain-washing job in Korea and what happens afterward, and it is crisply, tightly and altogether admirably acted by a big company headed by Arthur Kennedy and Richard Kiley. If you are willing to accept

it as good melodramatic fiction, I think you'll like it very much.

What Made Him Break?

The play centers around a hearing in a judge advocate's office in an army post in the U. S., where a major—Kiley—is up on a charge that he went over to the enemy side after 14 months in a prison camp in North Korea and even made propaganda broadcasts for the enemy. The authors have said they got the idea from the heroic story of Gen. Dean, who resisted brain-washing and did not break. In "Time Limit" the authors have

supposed that a high officer has broken, and they try to figure out how and why.

They let Kennedy do the figuring. Kennedy is the judge advocate, and it is up to him to decide if the major should be court-martialed. The evidence is all against the major, and so is the major himself, who admits his guilt most stubbornly. The judge advocate, however, is just as stubborn. He has a hunch that not everything has been told—that Maj. Kiley has not succumbed to the North Koreans because of the destruction of his moral fibre, but because he has retained his moral fibre. It might even be that his apparent desertion has been caused by high and perhaps even patriotic principle.

Steady Suspense

So the judge advocate battles a determined officer who insists on admitting his shameful guilt, and starts digging for the truth. An effective setting by Ralph Alswang permits an instantaneous change from an army office to a Korean prison camp, so there are flashbacks of what happened in North Korea four years before.

"Time Limit" is, as I said, a melodrama of suspense, and the suspense is steadily and craftily built. It would not be fair here to disclose what Kennedy finds out. It should only be reported that the play contains some swift, brutal and exciting action, and its few lapses are not particularly damaging.

Under Windsor Lewis' direction the actors work admirably. Kennedy, Kiley, Harvey Stephens and Thomas Carlin carry the emotional burden. There is a nice performance by Allyn McLerie as a WAC secretary and a very touching short scene by Patricia Benoit as the accused major's wife. Frank Aletter offers some effective comedy relief as a smart-talking sergeant. If you go to see "Time Limit" watch that young fellow Carlin.



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and
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January 25, 1956

'Time Limit' Probes Treason

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

The Booth's new drama, "Time Limit," concerns one of the most disturbing questions of our time.

Tradition, law and experience proclaim that military duty is absolute. Under the new barbarism, we face a different application of that duty, grown from unprincipled treatment of prisoners of war.

It is one thing for a commander to order men into action and sure death when the strategy is for the greater

good. It is quite another thing to make a considered, bargaining decision when the lives involved will be deliberately, wantonly sacrificed.

Idea of Treason.

"Time Limit" surveys the idea of treason among prisoners subjected to brainwashing. Some five years after the fact, a major is being investigated for possible court-martial. He has lectured and broadcast in favor of communism and confessed to germ warfare.

Now he will make no defense.

Because of quirks in the massive testimony, identically repeated phrases and odd quotations, the judge advocate persists in boring deep into an "open-and-shut" case.

Gradually he draws out a terrifying but believable chain of ugly, uncivilized facts. In the end, he is hoping, not necessarily for acquittal, but for a reappraisal of duty.

Food for Thought.

The play's great strength is that it makes no final declaration, but opens and stimu-

lates a sore and difficult thesis.

Arthur Kennedy is fine as the judge advocate, harassed and stubborn, risking much for principle, yet thoroughly human.

Richard Kiley achieves important new size as an actor as the major due for court-martial. He must play in full tide of emotion. He does it with taste and variety.

Thomas Carlin is an interesting young actor in a pivotal and devious role, and Harvey Stephens gives the chilly general great dignity.

Allyn McLerie is that rare woman who can look seductive in a uniform. She projects a wealth of simple character in gentle underplaying.

Patricia Benoit, famous as "Mrs. Peepers," has a keen style and astute dramatic power as the accused man's wife.

"Time Limit" is a bombshell of human endurance.

NEW YORK
Herald Tribune
January 25, 1956

THEATER

'Time Limit!'

By WALTER F. KERR

FOR "Time Limit!," the new melodrama at the Booth, designer Ralph Alswang has succeeded in turning the stage inside out: in the flicker of an eyelid the humdrum offices of a military Judge Advocate are transformed, by a miracle of backlighting, into a barbed-wire jungle. Authors Henry Denker and Ralph Berkey are hot after such a miracle, too: they want to turn a soldier's brain inside out, to see what made him go over to communism in a Korean prison camp.

Major Harry Cargill is ripe for a court-martial. He has, on the evidence, betrayed his fellow-Americans by lecturing them on the evils of capitalism, by making "germ-war" broadcasts, by co-operating fully with the Chinese forces around him. Now, back in the United States, he will not defend himself. And his sullen, stubborn silence raises perplexing questions in the mind of the man who must prosecute him. Why has this

man crumpled under pressure, and not another? What sort of pressure does turn a man's brain to water? What, for the sake of the record and for the sake of the future, is the truth behind a national scandal?

The questions are important ones, and they make for a hushed, nervous, electrically attentive first act. As Arthur Kennedy, striding restlessly around his Judge Advocate's desk, pleads and prods and wheedles his way toward an elusive answer, the intellectual give-and-take is thoroughly stimulating—more stimulating, in fact, than the nicely-managed flashback to the actual scene of the crime. The pieces of the puzzle, as they begin to move toward coherence, are fascinating.

Furthermore, as we come closer to a defiant explanation of one man's defection, bursts of effective theatrical violence light up the stage. A passage—one more flashback—in which

bedraggled men cast lots in preparation for a murder and then complete the deed under cover of a rousing chorus of "California, Here I Come" is stingingly graphic. Another in which an edgy youngster, bluffing his way through an inquisition with apparent boyish candor, breaks wide open into hysterical confession is vividly played by Thomas Carlin. When, late in the evening, each of the embattled principals is given the signal to haul off and state his side of the case in open passion, the words flow with considerable fire.

Why, then, does "Time Limit!" seem to thin out along the way, to approach its roaring climax with a kind of waning sense of responsibility? I don't think the fairly routine language ("I've been doing a little reading, Evans; I've been doing a little thinking, too") can be held wholly responsible for this failure of importance. Nor is the absence of genuine personality behind the debating figures the sole cause. I suspect that authors Denker and Berkey have, finally, built their plea around too extraordinary a case for the purposes of general illumination. In part, they duck the issue of one "brain-washing" by referring it back to another (unexplained). And—by contriving to make Harry Cargill's bitterest enemy a co-incidental victim of the same

irresistible pressures—they have undercut the early intellectual vitality with an air of trumped-up melodrama.

Richard Kiley, as the suspect man who is willing to take any punishment meted out to him, shapes the rising tension with shrewd skill. Feinting with the lawyer who would like to save him, swallowing hard and asking vaguely that essential questions be repeated, he nurses the role along to a last-minute explosion that is both logical and moving.

Arthur Kennedy, fresh from an excitingly inventive performance in the motion picture "Trial," maneuvers the question-and-answer sessions that take up most of the action with great adroitness. If he is, at the last, forced to rub his lip, double his fist, and raise his voice speculatively in an urgent and not quite successful attempt to pump astonishment into some of the authors' more transparent lines, the fault is never his.

In the supporting company, Patricia Benoit, Allyn McLerie, Harvey Stephens, and Frank Aletter do nobly with some single-dimension characters.

"Time Limit!" has taken a robust whack at the barbed-wire that tangles men's minds. But when it cuts through, it does not cut quite clean.